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1954

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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"Reclining Figure"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 8, 1954

'Reclining Figure' Stands on Its Jokes

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There are lots of perfectly lovely jokes in "Reclining Figure" at the Lyceum. They decorate the play like ornaments on a Christmas Tree.

This is a good thing, because the play itself has more sap than timber in it. The whole stir is about a nutty millionaire who makes a soft drink, and buys expensive paintings to shut them up where nobody can see them.

A young dealer brings him a newly discovered Renoir, falls in love with his daughter, then discovers the real painter of the alleged masterpiece is there in the house.

You wish that this was a farce, but it all too often insists on taking itself seriously. It even has a moral. In the end, the rich man is convinced that it was the forgery which made him appreciate art for the first time in his life.

Could Be More Artful.

I hope the actors play this faster and more gaily from tonight on. The jokes are the best part of the evening, and they could prepare you for them more artfully than they do.

Sample humor is: "My idea of being really rich is to be able to afford an illiterate butler." And: "I feel like a guy in an unfixed wrestling match." In context they are funnier, and the situation laughs are just fine.

Naturally, there is a painting very much in evidence. It is an extremely attractive one of a fruitful nude. The producers make a bit of a mistake in keeping it in full view so much of the time. When the conversation drags, the actors become invisible, and you cannot look at anything onstage but the oil-and-canvas lady.

A Nod for Percy Waram.

Percy Waram plays the eccentric rich man, who is thoroughly disagreeable, and abusive without being witty. How Mr. Waram makes him attractive I do not know, but he does.

Martin Gabel, co-producer, plays an art dealer from Budapest with delightful lazy immorality. His sales talk on the phone to a Texas oilionairess is a pure joy.

Georgiann Johnson is an extremely pretty and smart girl in the case, and Mike Wallace, of television fame, has charm and neat incisiveness as the young involuntary hoaxer.

Berry Kroeger is fine as the original talented forger, and Ralph Bunker has one particularly hilarious sequence in which he translates the enthusiasm of a French painting expert.

Another gaily wicked sequence is offered by David Opatoshu as the crooked gentleman who proves the forgery.

"RECLINING FIGURE"

Comedy by Harry Kurnitz; staged by Abe Burrows; scenery and lighting by Frederick Fox; presented by Martin Gabel and Henry M. Margolis in association with Peter Cusick at the Lyceum Theatre, September 8, 1954. The cast:

William.....Foster Davis
Samuel Ellis.....Mike Wallace
Cass Edgerton.....Georgiann Johnson
Lucas Edgerton...Percy Waram
Agramonte.....Ralph Bunker
Paul Weldon.....Berry Kroeger
Jonas Astorg.....Martin Gabel
Denesco.....David Opatoshu
Dr. Hickey...Nehemiah Persoff
Prof. Jumelie.....Alfred Hess

Journal-American

October 8, 1954

Play Sparkles Just Too Late

Comedy of Art Collectors Takes Too Long to Be Funny

By JOHN McCLAIN

MUCH as I despise the expression, much as I like most of the people involved, I'm afraid "Reclining Figure," the new Harry Kurnitz comedy which came into the Lyceum Theatre last night—just misses. It starts at a laggard pace, meanders ineffectually through two acts, and then comes to hilarious life in the last stanza. But it's too late for baby.

From this corner of the dugout the trouble seemed to be that an exploration of the strange world of art collectors is perhaps too complex to be immediately funny.

Kurnitz has a large and varied assortment of operators and it takes quite a while to know them and the irrational behavior indigenous to their breed. After we become acquainted they are very comical indeed, but by this time the guy has his hand on the rope to lower the final curtain.

Few customers in an average audience will understand a character who keeps hundreds of priceless paintings in an underground vault, or will be emotionally aroused by the fact that he may be buying a fake Renoir for $100,000. Yet for the first two chapters, these are the ingredients that keep the ball in the air.

Bland Banditry

There is the eager young art dealer who thinks he has found a lost masterpiece, the eccentric millionaire with the invaluable collection, the charming daughter who prefers the flesh of the young dealer to any amount of paint and canvas, real or phony, and a delightfully unscrupulous big-time picture hustler who is trying to replace all the moose heads over the fireplaces in Texas with Toulouse-Lautrecs.

When we finally get with these people, we like them. We begin to find some realism in the oblique behavior of the old man; we are caught by the boy's ambition to open a small gallery for unknown artists, and the girl's sympathy for his integrity. And we must certainly be won by the bland banditry of Jonas Astorg, who recognizes the reproduction of Utrillos as "the fourth largest industry in France." But, as I say, it all comes too late.

In the interim however, the operators speak with wit and intelligence. Mr. Kurnitz has a flair for epigram, much of it uttered unfortunately before we are sufficiently in the medium, and some of it slightly labored—but none of it juvenile.

Gabel Shines

For performance Martin Gabel easily gets the duke as Astorg, employing a middle-European accent, powdered hair and a clipped mustache.

His telephone conversation with a Texas millionairess who has just struck oil under her tennis court will remain a minor—maybe major—classic.

Percy Waram, as the elderly collector, delivers a beautifully incisive interpretation of this rather baffling part; Mike Wallace, bowing-in as a Broadway actor, is personable and assured as the young man, and Georgiann Johnson is a capable and most decorative heroine.

Other contributions of note are offered by Berry Kroeger, Ralph Bunker and, briefly but with fine effect, David Opatoshu.

I would like to say Abe Burrows did a great job as director, but how can you say that when the whole thing fell short of fulfillment? Score it a near miss all around.

The New York Times

October 8, 1954

Theatre: Comic Forgery

By BROOKS ATKINSON

MIXING a few ideas with a lot of professional cynicism, Harry Kurnitz has written a funny comedy entitled "Reclining Figure," which opened at the Lyceum last evening. It tells the story of an eccentric collector of paintings who buys a forgery with considerable gusto and pride.

The irascible personality of the collector obviously suggests the late Albert C. Barnes, who locked up a fabulous collection of masterpieces in his private storehouse in Merion, Pa. But most of "Reclining Figure suggests an experienced screen writer who knows how to put a journeyman comedy together and equip it with a succession of sardonic lines.

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Originally, Mr. Kurnitz' comedy was dubbed "Reclining Nude"—a noun regarded as too racy for the theatre. But the reclining figure is a nude, ascribed to Renoir and certified by any number of technical experts and critics. Actually, it is a forgery done by a drunken retoucher employed by the collector. Since the collector has an evil temper and a scornful tongue, nearly everyone associated with him is eager to slip a forgery into his gallery. He does buy it, though he knows what he has done almost at once.

Mr. Kurnitz writes by formula. "Reclining Figure" is an assembled job. But the subject of art is more refreshing than most of the subjects belabored with the slapstick on Broadway. And Mr. Kurnitz' relish of charlatanism among art dealers brings a stimulating influence into the theatre. Mr. Kurnitz can also write any number of maliciously amusing lines. Put a crooked dealer and a forger together and he is in fine fettle as a dialogue writer. Nothing honest impairs the integrity of his play.

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Frederick Fox has set "Reclining Figure" in an interesting library with several useful acting areas. Abe Burrows has directed a practical performance in which the lines are expertly spoken. All the acting is entertaining. As the petulant, choleric collector, Percy Waram has a dry touch that is highly amusing. Martin Gabel's unctuous, elegant, charlatan dealer is very funny, indeed. As the collector's enterprising daughter, Georgainn Johnson gives a mettlesome performance; and Mike Wallace does well with the part of a dealer who comes as close as possible to being on the level. There is one especially skillful performance by David Opatoshu as a European master of chicanery.

As a maker of comedy, Mr. Kurnitz lives more by his wit than his invention. "Reclining Figure" is thinner than most Renoir Models. But Mr. Kurnitz' wit is sharp, mordant and tonic, and a satisfactory substitute for originality in play design.

Daily Mirror

October 8, 1954

'Reclining Figure' Proves Hilarious at Lyceum

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Martin Gabel and Henry M. Margolis, in association with Peter Cusick, brought a literate and hilarious comedy called "Reclining Figure" to the Lyceum Theatre Thursday evening. In it, Harry Kurnitz sticks some amusing harpoons into artists, art dealers, their sometimes overly trusting patrons, to say nothing of the critics.

"RECLINING FIGURE" has the solid virtue of becoming funnier as it progresses. It gets away to a modestly antic start, works up to some sock laughs in the middle and ends on some of the most robust and rewarding howls of the current semester. It combines a little romance with a little larceny, intelligent humor and intriguing characterizations.

The story it tells is of a budding young art dealer who thinks he has discovered a rare Renoir, sells it to an eccentric millionaire, only to learn that his shrewd former employer has rigged a hoax to teach a straying customer a lesson in loyalty. He is a decent boy, who merely wants to escape from sales cliches, striped trousers and old masters in order to further the careers of gifted contemporary artists.

Naturally, in this best of all possible worlds, the young idealist has to retain his integrity in the face of temptation, and thus win the hand of the rich art collector's beautiful daughter. Well' what's wrong with some nice sentiment in the midst of Machiavellian cross and double-cross?

CO-PRODUCER Gabel helps to insure his investment in "Reclining Figure" by doubling in brass as the suave and wily super-salesman of authentic and dubious masterpieces. His performance is immensely right and engaging. It finds a fitting complement in Percy Waram's fascinating portrait of a selfish, determined and temperamental soft-drink tycoon who invests some of his millions in art and a steel vault to hide it from the world.

Mike Wallace, of the radio and TV, makes an auspicious bow as the likable and well-meaning victim of his mentor's chicanery. Georgiann Johnson, a pleasant blonde eye-tonic, is charming as the girl who knows what she wants and gets it.

Berry Kroeger, Ralph Bunker, Alfred Hesse, Nehemiah Persoff and David Opatoshu are wonderfully diverting in other roles. And there is an ingratiating impersonation of a knowing butler, who would be an even more primitive painter than Grandma Moses, by William Foster-Davis.

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ABE BURROWS, who helped fashion such super-musicals as "Guys and Dolls" and "Can-Can," has directed the new arrival with a sure hand and unerring insight. We suspect that he is responsible for many of the lustier yacks. And Frederick Fox has designed a suitable setting.

If you happen to be interested in art; you won't want to miss "Reclining Figure." And even if you aren't, but are merely looking for good entertainment, a visit to the Lyceum should be well worth your while.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

October 8, 1954

THEATER

'Reclining Figure'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE new play at the Lyceum is all about a Renoir nude with which there is absolutely nothing wrong except that it's fake. And "Reclining Figure" strikes me as a comedy with which there is absolutely nothing wrong except that it's not terribly funny.

It's sort of funny. We'd best say that right off. Playwright Harry Kurnitz has hit upon a background that generates its own chaos: the sleek, effusive and cheerfully dishonest world of the art experts. He has set up a gullible millionaire who keeps ten-cent cigars in a twelve - hundred - dollar spice chest and who is fond of collecting the recent masters. He runs him afoul of a high-pressure dealer who is given to crying like a baby when parting with his treasures, a hard-drinking "restorer" with a talent for forgery and a soft-headed young salesman with high ideals and, unfortunately, a hot property on his hands.

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The chicanery pyramids with an easy logic, throats are cut with casual charm, and for a fairish amount of the time the intrigue is enticing. Furthermore, Mr. Kurnitz is not a man to lay obvious eggs with his dialogue. He has caught the lingo of a fabulous trade nicely enough, he doesn't strain after the boff that isn't there, and he gets his best effects with mild-mannered throwaways: "I feel like a guy in an unfixed wrestling match," or "My idea of really rich is to be able to afford an illiterate butler."

But Mr. Kurnitz' precise comic level is a little difficult to detect. Though the materials suggest it, he has avoided wide-open farce; every one behaves much too reasonably, and much too quietly, for that. And he hasn't, on the other hand, really aspired to the glittering epigrammatic style of high bad manners. Characters do drop polished constructions now and then, but they are apt to belong to the school of "I could bear poverty but I couldn't stand not having money." At other times the characters roar, but the roar is often a pale echo of Clarence Day: "Just because I hire you as an art expert doesn't give you the right to come in here and shoot off your mouth about my paintings!" The author doesn't work very hard over his gems; they have a